TALES FROM THE MEDIA: AN INTERVIEW

For the last nineteen years, Irv Drasnin has been employed by CBS News as a producer, director, and writer. He has produced fifteen full length documentaries, on topics ranging from Rhodesia and advertising to football and Americans' perceptions of China. His most controversial work was "Guns of Autumn", a documentary on hunting in America. Televised in 1975, the documentary—which was generally perceived as anti-hunting—provoked nearly fifty thousand letters of protest and praise, and three lawsuits, one of which is still pending. Drasnin, who began his career as a print journalist for United Press International (UPI), left CBS last spring to teach at Stanford. Part of his reason for leaving, he says, was his increasing discomfort with "trends in television journalism". In this interview, Drasnin explores these trends and the degree to which he believes the networks are responsible for their correction.

—Mindy Mayer and Tom Casciato

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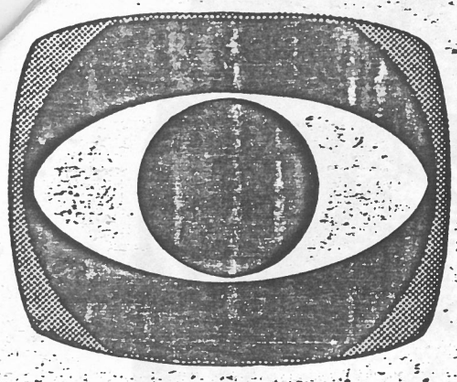

DT: Is television an inherently superficial medium?

Drasnin: I think it inherently has limitations. You only have so much time in which to tell a story, in which to cover a subject, in which to explore certain ideas, in which to examine issues. And perforce, that imposes a certain superficiality on the result. You are reduced to generalizations. You are reduced to examining slices of things. No documentary can be said to be all-inclusive, all-embracing, the definitive word on any subject. It *can* do things you can't do in print. It can involve, it can provide a subjective experience, an emotional involvement and an understanding of things that print can not provide. But it can only *supplement* print if you're talking about informing the public about what it ought to know. I think that it's a mistake to rely solely upon television or radio as your source of information. You're not going to get enough information that way.

DT: How many people do you think treat it as a supplement to printed information?

Drasnin: Probably far too few. I think statistics show that most people rely solely on television as their primary source of information.

DT: Do you feel responsible for that at all, or do you feel that you are just doing your job?

Drasnin: I feel *burdened* by it. I'm not responsible in the sense that I cause it. But it is a burden and a responsibility therefore to do as complete and fair a job as possible, and that's a tough job.

DT: How fair a job do you think network documentary films do?

Drasnin: Well, I don't think you can generalize. I think by and large the *intent* is honorable, that the state of the art is not always well enough understood and that there's a large margin for error of judgement. One of the problems is that regardless of what time they're put on, or when they're put on, there is just not the time available to the news divisions to do half the job they ought to be doing. The question then arises: what kind of job would they be doing if they had the time? One can only hope that they would do a responsible one. But it's true there are trends in television news which I am becoming increasingly uncomfortable with, and they have to do with the news more and more as a profit center and as a source of ratings, and with the competitive pressures that have been placed on news divisions and news programs to do well against the other networks or stations.

DT: What, specifically, is the difference between news now and then?

Drasnin: Until three or four years ago, one never heard of, or at least I never heard of, the news division center being referred to as a profit center. I never heard of anyone talk about "Well, how did we do on the ratings?" And I never heard documentaries or any other news programs being referred to as "product". So there's been a change in mentality and orientation.

DT: And how does that affect what we see?

Drasnin: That affects programming. For one thing, if you're going to be part of the entertainment industry, there's a tendency to think in terms of a star system, and that means that you have to have personalities who you think are going to attract a large audience. You can only achieve that, I suppose, by *featuring* those personalities, by making them an important part of your programming. Well, in news suddenly, it's not enough to *report* a story—there's an alarming trend of reporters becoming part of the story. In one way, it started in local news stations, with the happy news talk and the planned scripted comraderie between the weatherman, anchorman and reporter. You find it in documentaries, where the correspondents are constantly walking into or out of shot and out of another, competing for attention in many aspects with the people they're interviewing—they become celebrities in and of themselves. Is *that* journalistically sound? I mean I think there is a legitimate question that has to be raised: what's more important, the story or the storyteller?

DT: You would say the story?

Drasnin: I would most emphatically say the story.

DT: Do you think the story currently is the more important thing?

Drasnin: I think sometimes it is, and I think that anyone you asked who was in the television news business would give you the same answer. But I think you have to examine that "product" they talk about these days for yourself and draw your own conclusions because it seems to me that we're seeing more and more involvement on the part of the reporters.

DT: Like "60 Minutes"?

Drasnin: "60 Minutes", "Twenty-Twenty", even on local stations news shows—not so much on network news shows.

DT: Is that true of print journalism too?

Drasnin: Well, we went through this whole business of personal journalism. The idea was that nobody was objective—which is probably fair enough—and which to me is not the point. The point is: are we going to strive to be objective or are we going to insert our political views and attitudes and biases into a story? I'm not saying that it is possible to be absolutely objective—I doubt that it is—but it is possible to do your damnedest to be objective and to do your damnedest to be as fair as possible, and in other words, to be professional. I think the objective, regardless of the extent to which one fails, is to fairly represent different points of view about any controversial subject, or about any subject of public importance...William Paley, Sarnoff, or any of the others, aren't supposed to be able to foist their points of view on the public. I mean I know what their point of view is, and I don't *want* to know, just like I don't want to know who the sponsor is. Normally, CBS doesn't let you know who the sponsors are for a documentary, and when you finish you don't even put the commercials in a broadcast—someone else does it.

"I think ["60 Minutes" is] good for television. I'm not sure how good it is for journalism."

DT: Do you think that we might be moving away from that sort of system now though, as we see news more as entertainment?

Drasnin: Well, I think the line between news and entertainment has become increasingly thin.

DT: Do you think that this trend will continue?

Drasnin: I don't know. I'm not a prophet. But I know that it is also interesting to see the entertainment divisions—the "other guys"—try to capitalize on what they see to be the *popularity* of reality, of *actuality*! Programs like "Speak Up, America", and "That's Incredible!", and there's another one...

DT: "Real People"?
Drasnin: "Real People", right. I mean there you have so-called reality as entertainment, put out by the *entertainment* division.

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DT: How powerful do you think TV is?
Drasnin: Well, it's yet to be calculated what the influence of anything on television is, but I can't help but feel that it *does* carry influence, and in ways so subtle we may not even understand them or realize them. It can condition us to see things in a certain way. Like advertising. Everyone says "Oh well, I don't believe advertising". I'm not sure that's true. I think there is a subtle, subconscious, insidious process at work. And if it didn't work, I doubt very much that American companies would be spending billions upon billions upon billions of advertising on us.
DT: If you do a documentary, how many people are going to see it?
Drasnin: I'd say at least five to ten million.
DT: At least. Then you're influencing five to ten million lives?
Drasnin: I don't know if I'm doing that. I never know what the effect of a documentary I've made is.
DT: What about "Guns of Autumn"?
Drasnin: Well, I know what the *response* was to "Guns of Autumn", at least that which was made known to me, which was considerable. But I don't know what the effect has been in terms of change or...or...however you want to measure that. I don't know how deep it goes, I don't know how long it is remembered.
DT: Does that ever frustrate you?
Drasnin: Yes, it's frustrating to spend six or nine months on something, and have it become such a part of your life, and it goes on television, and one hour later it disappears. Now some documentaries do have an afterlife, but it's not on television—it's whatever syndication value it has, or whatever is perceived to be of educational value. And you're not even aware, all the time, of what that is. You don't really know what use it is put to.
DT: If documentaries ever become popular, will there be regular air time for them?
Drasnin: Well, no. There *used* to be regular air time years ago. There hasn't been for a long time now. They are not getting more popular. What is getting more popular is the magazine format. Because "60 Minutes" has demonstrated that in the right time period, that format can be very successful. In the first years of its existence, "60 Minutes" didn't do very well. It was on prime time TV during the week, and it was against adult competition. I don't want to put down "60 Minutes" but that's a fact. Then they found this seven o'clock time period on Sunday night, against "Disney World" and "The Hardy Boys" and "Nancy Drew" or whatever it was on ABC, and "60 Minutes" found an audience. Ironically, "60 Minutes" became a kind of alternative programming (laughs). It was the only adult film programming on at seven o'clock on Sunday night.
DT: How do you feel about that brand of journalism on "60 Minutes"?
Drasnin: Well, I think that it is symptomatic of alot of the trends that have taken over television journalism. It certainly emphasizes the role of the reporter in the story. It seems to me to reflect that mix of confrontational journalism, that has come to be called "investigative reporting," with light entertainment. I think it's very good for television. I'm not sure how good it is for journalism. But it is expertly done.

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DT: Who chooses the subject matter for documentaries?
Drasnin: Well, there's no one person that chooses the documentary subject. Management thinks it has the best ideas for documentary subjects, and the producers think they have the best ideas for documentary subjects, and there are at least the trappings of negotiations. Sometimes you get to pursue your own ideas—but most often you don't. The other side of that coin is that sometimes management has some good ideas.
DT: Does management usually have more commercially oriented ideas?
Drasnin: I'm not sure how to answer that, because if I said yes, I'm not sure I could prove it. I admit that sometimes one harbors that suspicion. On the other hand, I've heard management argue vehemently for subjects of importance that producers didn't want to do because they didn't think that they were subjects that lent themselves well to television, or that they were the best uses of a visual medium.
DT: For instance...
Drasnin: Anything having to do with economics. I mean how do you film economics?
DT: "The shrinking dollar"...
Drasnin: (laughs) Even oil, oil's a problem. Inflation: how do you deal with energy prices? I mean huge issues that television should be

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addressing, and which it is crucial that the public be informed about. But they are difficult subjects to translate into film, you know, short of having alot of talking heads.

DT: So you look for the controversial when you make a documentary?

Drasnin: I don't. I think our job is not to create it—our job is certainly to cover it. There is a difference.

DT: Do you think some people do look to create it?

Drasnin: I think in every aspect of journalism, print or broadcast, you are going to find individuals given to sensationalism. I think that's been true from the beginning of the profession.

DT: Do you think television's responsibility has grown along with the size of the audience?

Drasnin: I think the responsibility is absolute. I don't care if the audience is two. It increases the burden, certainly, but the responsibility is there no matter how big the audience is, and no matter whether it's in print or broadcast.

DT: So in the case of a documentary like "Gay Power, Gay Politics", who is responsible?*

Drasnin: Well, the producers of the broadcast have got to take responsibility. They are the ones who are most closely connected with the production. Management doesn't really see it until it is finished or nearly finished, and the correspondent may be on that particular assignment for only a week or two. They're all dependent on the producer or producers of that broadcast, who have to take responsibility for the work.

DT: Do you think the producers should have apologized for "Gay Power, Gay Politics"?

Drasnin: For "Gay Power, Gay Politics"? You haven't yet asked me if I thought there was anything to apologize for. (laughs)

DT: What was your opinion of "Gay Power, Gay Politics"?

Drasnin: My opinion of "Gay Power, Gay Politics" is that it had something to do with gay power and gay politics, but it probably should have been called "Gay Sex, Violence, and Politics". I thought it was sensational, I thought that the content did not support the title or the avowed purpose of the broadcast. The way the broadcast was constructed, it almost seems that the issue of gay political power in San Francisco—which apparently is a legitimate one—was a vehicle to get into other more sensational even sordid aspects and stereotyping of homosexual life in the gay community of San Francisco. I don't know what the sexual behavior of an individual has to do with that individual's political behavior or views or attitudes or preferences. I just considered a lot of the material in the broadcast irrelevant. And if you are going to examine the lifestyle and the mores of a particular group or community, then it seems to me that you are obligated to do that in a more responsible way. I mean I heard from no psychologists, or sociologists, or other qualified experts on questions of moral decay or decadence or promiscuity or sexual preferences that were raised in that broadcast about gays. I think that broadcast was based on a lot of assumptions that may or may not have been true. I think that broadcast raises a lot of questions about fairness and responsibility of the journalist. And—what was the original question?

DT: Whether or not you thought the producers should have apologized.

Drasnin: Well, let me put it this way. There was a clear-cut breach of journalistic ethics in the broadcast when they put in applause where it didn't exist. You can call that staging, you can call that manipulation, you can call that fakery, I don't care what you call it, it was a breach of CBS policy and of journalistic ethics. I think *that* is where they owe an apology.

DT: Why did CBS apologize?

Drasnin: Well, you really have to ask CBS that question. I don't know. It was reviewed by the National News Council, which found the broadcast to be one-sided in some respects, and did cite this business of the applause and CBS chose to respond to that. I think that was a responsible thing to do. Having said that, one can raise a legitimate question about the manner of the response. I mean it was broadcast in such a way in terms of its positioning and technique as to render it as obscure as possible.

DT: Specifically the technique being...

Drasnin: First of all, it was at the very tail end of a documentary whose credits had already been run. Then there was a promo for local news on KPIX, then you had four commercials and then you had a slide, a still of "Gay Power, Gay Politics", with a

*"Gay Power, Gay Politics", a CBS documentary on San Francisco's gay community and its role in the city's politics which was released last winter. The documentary's attention to sado-masochistic and other sexually extreme sides of gay life produced a storm of protests and accusations. The National News Council reviewed the film and found it biased. The Council also found that the producers had inserted applause into a sequence where it did not exist.

disembodied monotone reciting 90 seconds of the findings of the National News Council and CBS's regret over this applause business. And immediately followed by two or three or four more commercials. That's not exactly drawing attention to what was being said. I dare say that most people probably wouldn't have noticed it if they were still in the *room* at that point. Then on the other hand, if I were the network executive, I wouldn't have wanted to draw a lot of attention to it either. I would have been very embarrassed by it. As a professional, I'm embarrassed by "Gay Power, Gay Politics."

DT: Do you think the apology had an effect on the documentary division of CBS?

Drasnin: Probably not. It's probably forgotten already. I mean it should serve as an object lesson in one way, I suppose, to those who are concerned. And that is that you do *not* have to be a silent receptacle for what is offered you on television. You can complain, you can protest. You can raise questions of fairness and in some instances, you can be heard. You also have to understand that there is a certain "Rashamon" effect. I mean everyone brings their own perceptions to what they see on television. The bias does not always come from out of the television set. And as one who has been the subject of at least one group's wrath and outrage and accusation, I can tell you that people often see and hear only what they want to see and hear. I mean we live in a society of a great many vested interests and pressure groups, and their view of objectivity is that which reflects their own point of view.

DT: You are no longer working for CBS?

Drasnin: That's correct. After 19 years, it was enough.

DT: So you thought that by quitting them...

Drasnin: I thought the time had come, I'd reached the point in my life and in my career that I wanted—I needed—to take a step back. I needed a mid-career break...I *was* becoming increasingly uncomfortable with trends in television journalism. And I think there's a point in everyone's life where if you don't make a move by a certain time or at a certain point, you may never make that move. And I didn't want to look back twenty years from now and have regrets. I'm not saying I will never go to work for a network again, or for CBS—I may well, I don't know. What I wanted was at least a year to think about that.